



Gay pride. Brian Butler, left, and Skip Geel stand in their front yard under the American and Gay Pride flags that fly over their Wilton Manors house. Gays and lesbians make up about

35 percent to 40 percent of the nearly 13,000 residents of the small island city outside of Fort Lauderdale. Many say they like the ease with which gays and straights live side by side.

AP photos

City thrives as gay enclave

Changes in life. George Kessinger, foreground, sits outside his cafe in Wilton Manors, talking about the changes in his community and how it has become a bustling gay enclave.



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WILTON MANORS — In the most recent elections in this small island city, four out of five candidates were gay. But that is not exactly remarkable in Wilton Manors.

Within the past decade, this once-rundown city outside Fort Lauderdale has become a bustling gay enclave. Gays and lesbians make up perhaps 35 percent to 40 percent of the nearly 13,000 residents.

The initial draw for many was the affordable housing compared with nearby gay-friendly areas in Fort Lauderdale and Miami Beach.

But even as property prices shoot up, Wilton Manors remains a draw for gays, many of whom say they like the ease with which gays and straights live side by side.

Unlike other communities in Florida with large gay populations, such as Key West and Miami Beach's South Beach, Wilton Manors is a quiet place, not one bolstered by a nonstop party.

"Gay people don't just identify with each other," Tom Elliott, who lives in Fort Lauderdale but works at Java Boys, a Wilton Manors coffee shop. "We grew up in small towns with next-door neighbors and churches and schools and knowing all the people. And all of a sudden you see this in a

don't feel like you're the only gay people in town."

Wilton Manors is one of four U.S. cities to have a gay majority on its city council. The others are West Hollywood and Palm Springs, Calif., and Mount Rainier, Md.

"Here I am, a straight man and this is supposedly a gay mecca," said Scott Newton, who was elected mayor in March. "But this is a community for all. That's why all the gays come here, because it's very welcoming."

Most of the businesses in the downtown's main strip mall are gay-owned or clearly are marked with rainbow flags or stickers.

Managers George Alibi Bar & Grill, a gay bar that opened seven years ago, as the catalyst that helped turn Wilton Manors into a haven for gays.

"When we came here, this was a ghost town," said owner George Kessinger, who is gay. "We created something, we put a demand on something."

Kelvyn Rivera, for one, said he decided to move from Fort Lauderdale to Wilton Manors once he saw regulars at Alibi start to move into the city and buy up the then-cheap property.

In addition to Alibi and Java Boys, there is GayMart, a clothing and card store.

Janet Fredericks, 48, who has lived in Wilton Manors for 27 years, said the number of gay neighbors started to increase about five years ago.

"For me personally, it's not an issue," she said. "My gay neighbors are friendlier than my straight neighbors."

Not everyone feels the same. Angie Bermudez, 44, said she and her family have considered moving because of the influx of gay couples. "I'm raising three children, and I have concerns over the normality of them seeing two guys together," she said.

Some have said they don't want straight people to move out and make Wilton Manors a gays-only city.

"It will always be diverse, and most people want it to remain that way," Rivera said. "No one wants to live in a gay bubble." ■



Proud owner of a Laundromat, Russel Duncan shows off the Laundromat he and his partner owned